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ABSTRACT

Recent government initiatives to combat social exclusion within the United Kingdom have served to place librarians and libraries as prominent players in the movement to providing information over a wider social context. For example, The People's Network is a government initiative to connect all public libraries to the information superhighway by the end of 2002. Other similar initiatives to combat social exclusion are being undertaken by the Gates Foundation in the US, Canada and Chile. Internationally published literature demonstrates a recognition of the importance of access to information to the preservation and upholding of the democratic process, and the continual development of the electronic environment is central in facilitating these changes. An ever increasing amount of library and information science (LIS) literature is becoming available through electronic databases, with current trends suggesting that literature available in this format has the potential to be disseminated quickly, more easily, to a wider audience and more cost-effectively. Given these directives, LIS journals can be fundamental in encouraging library workers to see LIS in a wider social context, though an emphasis on focused,unbiased and current content which oversteps parochial boundaries. LIS journals can convey the wider social context by incorporating experiences of meeting and problem-solving new challenges, such as the provision of changing resources, their delivery by a variety of means, reaching remote users who may never visit a library, and the establishing of whole new client base and relationships. (Contains 21 references.) (Author)

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Social exclusion in the information profession, and how LIS journals can encourage information provision in a wider social context

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Abstract:

Recent government initiatives to combat social exclusion within the United Kingdom have served to place librarians and libraries as prominent players in the movement to providing information over a wider social context. For example, The People's Network is a government initiative to connect all public libraries to the information superhighway by the end of 2002. Other similar initiatives to combat social exclusion are being undertaken by the Gates Foundation in the US, Canada and Chile. Internationally published literature demonstrates a recognition of the importance of access to information to the preservation and upholding of the democratic process, and the continual development of the electronic environment is central in facilitating these changes. An ever increasing amount of LIS literature is becoming available through electronic databases, with current trends suggesting that literature available in this format has the potential to be disseminated quickly, more easily, to a wider audience and more cost-effectively. Given these directives, LIS journals can be fundamental in encouraging library workers to see LIS in a wider social context, though an emphasis on focused, unbiased and current content which oversteps parochial boundaries. LIS journals can convey the wider social context by incorporating experiences of meeting and problem-solving new challenges, such as the provision of changing resources, their delivery by a variety of means, reaching remote users who may never visit a library, and the establishing of whole new client base and relationships.

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The development of information technology has brought with it an increased awareness of those groups of people who are unable to take advantage, or be advantaged, by the escalation of available information. Social exclusion and its exoneration, social inclusion, the digital divide: these are all issues that are relevant nationally and internationally. This paper examines these concepts in the light of the library and information profession, and considers how library journals can play a part in the development of social equality within the information world.

In the United Kingdom, upon its election in 1997, the Labour Government set up the Social Exclusion Unit, with the remit of helping to 'improve Government action to reduce social exclusion by producing "joined up solutions to joined-up problems."' (Cabinet Office, 2001) The homepage of the Social Exclusion Unit's website defines social exclusion in the following way:

> Social exclusion is a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown. (Cabinet Office, 2001)

As Jeffs and Smith (2001) observe, this method of thinking is a throwback to cultural notions of an under-class, populated by under-skilled and disaffected people. Social exclusion brings about social destabilisation, which in turn places a strain upon a welfare state that serves to compensate rather than integrate ostracised groups. According to Jeffs and Smith, the definition of social exclusion given above, side steps the *causes* of social disadvantage by focusing on the process rather than the outcome. Social exclusion is not a by-product of economic and social processes, neither is it the deserved corollary of individual preference. Rather, it is 'the result of deliberate action on the part of a social collectivity or collectivities.' (Jeffs and Smith, 2001)

Government initiatives to combat social exclusion have served to place libraries and library workers as prominent players in the drive towards providing information over a wider social context. Such initiatives are fuelled by the recognition that those who are unable to adapt to the rapid progress of information technology, as well as those who simply do not have access to it, are, in their own way, socially excluded. The speed of technological advances that serve the provision of information causes what has become known as the "digital divide". This divide indicates a polarisation between those who are confident and capable of using information technology and have full and free access (known as the "information rich"), and those who are unfamiliar with rapid advances or are unable to gain easy access to modern information technology (known as the "information poor").

Hendry (2000) examines the Department of Trade and Industry's initiative, *IT for All* (1999), and concludes that 35% of adult society in the UK are made up of either "concerned" or "alienated" groups; "concerned" being those who are concerned about being left behind, "alienated" being those who are sceptical about the value of information technology, lacking interest or have no access to a PC. Both groups can be taken to be information poor.

Untrammelled, the digital divide threatens to create a new inequality, with the information poor becoming increasingly disadvantaged:

> Those who cannot grasp new opportunities at each stage in their working lives will find it more and more difficult to adapt to this new knowledge society. It is not enough for governments to try and provide job security as compensation. Instead, it will be necessary for governments to support and encourage people to adapt and be able to transfer knowledge and skills from one employment context to another. (Hendry, 2000, p.333)

One of the answers to combating social exclusion is actively to promote social inclusion, and it is this democratic notion of social inclusivity that has recently been put high on the agenda for libraries and information workers within the UK. *Open to All? The Public Library and Social Exclusion* (Muddiman et al., 2001) examines the role of public libraries in tackling social exclusion. The report is critical of public libraries for having to date 'adopted only weak, voluntary and "take it or leave it"

approaches to social inclusion.' (Muddiman et al., 2001, p.155) Consequences of this approach to service provision are outlined as:

- A continuing under-utilisation of public libraries by working-class people and other excluded social groups;
- A lack of knowledge in the public library world about the needs and views of excluded "non-users";
- The development in many public libraries of organisational, cultural, and environmental barriers which effectively exclude many disadvantaged people. (Muddiman et al., 2001, p.156)

Open to All? suggests that modernisation is not enough for public libraries to seriously address the complexities of social exclusion. Rather, they need to become 'much more proactive, interventionist and educative institutions, with a concern for social justice at their core.' (Muddiman et al., 2001, p. 158) In other words, in order for public libraries to tackle issues of social exclusion, they must actively adopt policies of social inclusion that place an ongoing commitment to social inclusivity within their working culture. This applies not only to public libraries, but to *all* libraries and information workers.

This sentiment is echoed in *Libraries for All: Social Inclusion in Public Libraries* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999). This document observes that libraries are one of the best placed organisations within the cultural sector to bring about change in order to combat social exclusion. The report outlines the overall aim of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's social inclusion policy as:

> "To promote the involvement in culture and leisure activities of those at risk of social disadvantage or maginalisation, particularly by virtue of the area they live in; their disability or age, racial or ethnic origin. To improve the quality of people's lives by these means." (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999, p.8)

The report identifies the moves that libraries can take to bring about this change at a community level, the most important of which is mainstreaming social inclusion as a policy priority within all library and information services, which includes proactively embracing those groups within the community who are currently information poor.

The scale and complexity of social exclusion issues now requires public libraries to take a fresh look at the extent to which their services embrace all parts of our society. Libraries now need to address what can be done to ensure that they serve the 40% of the population who are not library members. Public libraries are a focal point for the provision of information services in the community. As such, they have an important role to play in helping to combat social exclusion and promote lifelong learning. (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999, p.7)

Calling for the development of a 'sustainable community', the report identifies two types of barrier that may prevent this goal. The first are infrastructure barriers, 'which constrain the "connectedness" of a given neighbourhood' and include 'the flow of information and the provision of educational opportunities'; the second are cultural barriers, which may 'constrain people's ability to address the issues which affect them.' (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999, p.10)

As *Libraries for All* recognises, libraries hold a unique position at the heart of communities from within which to facilitate change. There is an emphasis upon tackling social exclusion at a local level, different local communities having different requirements as dictated by a whole range of demographics. In addition, it is the very nature of the library trade – the provision of information – that will best serve to alleviate this type of social exclusion, and diminish the proportion of information poor both within the communities they represent and therefore over society as a whole:

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> Communications and information are the lifeblood of sustainable communities, and public services such as libraries, together with community groups, are often important conduits for information and knowledge. In disadvantaged communities, isolation and inertia may constitute formidable barriers to the flow of information, personal relationships may be weak, and creative neighbourhood's networks may function poorly. Such communities are unlikely to enjoy the vital flow of information, through which residents share their experiences and act collectively to express their needs and improve their quality of life. (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999, p.10)

It is clear that the rapid advancement of information technology brings about a number of problems that may potentially deepen the divide between the information rich and the information poor: these include problems of access, awareness, training, and cultural barriers. Problems also arise in deciding the best methods for organisations to tackle social exclusion. Libraries must incorporate policies that address, engage and challenge social exclusion but, as Vincent (2001, p.93) discerns, 'this work cannot just be bolted on, but has to be mainstreamed – which has implications for resource allocation.'

One problem for staff and policy makers is making sense of the glut of information about issues of social exclusion, as well as addressing the requirements of official national and local policies and procedures. Jezzard (2001) points overwhelmed information professionals towards the website www.inclusionandlibraries.org.uk, which has been set up jointly by the Community Development Foundation, the Society of Chief Librarians and the Library Association's Community Services Group. The website serves as a central pool of available information and resources, linking to the website of the Cabinet Office's Social Exclusion Unit (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/), another useful resource for those trying to unpick the accumulation of government policies, procedures and initiatives around issues of social exclusion. One such initiative is *The People's Network* (www.peoples.network.gov.uk/), a government initiative committed to delivering the benefits of lifelong learning to the entire populace, the government having pledged to connect all public libraries to the information superhighway by the end of 2002. £170 million has been committed to the project to ensure this realisation. A recommendation from Department for Education and Employment (2001, p.11) states that the information supplied by libraries "promotes a wider understanding of the world, offers individuals of all ages the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills and gives everyone the opportunity to enjoy a rich and varied cultural life".

Of course, concerns over social exclusion brought about by the divide between the information rich and the information poor are not confined to the United Kingdom. The published literature of many other countries demonstrates an international concern with the importance of access to information, not only in order to encourage social inclusion, but also as a contribution to the preservation of cultural identity and the upholding of the democratic process.

For example, Miranda's (2000) paper on "Cultural content and identification in the information society" looks at how the Brazilian government needs to ensure the provision of internet content that is related to democratisation, social equity, citizenship and economic development. Miranda suggests that libraries have a fundamental role in instigating democratic access to the internet. Kargbo (1999) argues that 'democratic decision making, be it at a local or national level, depends on equality of access to information.' Kargbo says that in Sierra Leone, where democracy has only recently been restored, librarians, as information professionals, can play a vital role in the development of an informed – in other words, information rich – society.

An article published in France by Fritzinger (2001) gives an overview of a conference held in Lisbon in October 2000 on the theme of combating the information poor. The conference examined society and social exclusion, the importance of continuing education and the digitization of heritage materials. A paper given at the SCECSAL XIV Conference in Namibia by Massage and Nconcgwane (2000) traces key attempts to address information problems in post-apartheid South Africa. The paper

challenges the National Constitution for relegating libraries to provincial competence, thus perpetuating provincial and group inequalities.

A global perspective on the development of library and information services over the new century is taken by Umlauf (1999), envisaging an ideological information society wherein information services are dictated by the communities themselves. Umlauf (1999, p.140) suggests that 'libraries will be identified by the public they serve, not the parent institution, offering access to information rather than creating collections.' In this way, Umlauf predicts that libraries will become integrated through multimedia collections and online resources into the wider cultural and social context.

The continual development of the electronic environment, as well as the addressing of problems involved with that environment, is central in facilitating changes in access to information, both nationally and internationally. As Power (2000) observes, information technology has an important part to play in alleviating social exclusion in that it has the unique ability to share and preserve experiential knowledge and oral culture in a way that could not be made possible by print culture. For example, information technology is capable of preserving cultural heritage through digitisation.

However, this notion has its own complications. Jimba (2000) examines the development of information technology within Africa. He argues that, with information technology being developed almost exclusively in Western countries, it cannot simply be transferred to developing countries and be expected to function in a culturally appropriate way. Certain types of information are marginalised by the predominance of Western cultural information available. For example, Western science marginalises traditional African knowledge by virtue of its ubiquity in electronic formats. This situation creates a dependence on Western knowledge, and therefore exacerbates the divide between the information rich and the information poor by first ousting what information is available and then replacing it with information that may not be socially or culturally appropriate.

Jimba (1999) also argues that technology should be implemented within a social context in developing countries. Jimba is identifying the digital divide: the division between the information rich and the information poor. Whilst the digital divide exists on a national and international scale, it is in those countries struggling to develop an IT infrastructure where the digital divide becomes particularly prominent. With the inevitable global move from an industrial to an information economy, it is clear that those nations taking control of information (the information rich) have a massive advantage over the information poor. This brings about a perpetual and perpetuating imbalance of power, with information technology continuing to be biased towards those countries who are information rich and therefore reaping all the economic, social and intellectual benefits.

The real danger is that the digital divide - social exclusion on an international scale - is not a problem that can be addressed simply by securing access to technology. If anything, this runs the risk of further exiling struggling cultures. Jimba contends that the implementation of technology within developing countries should be conducted within appropriate social and cultural boundaries.

Despite the problems presented by the rapid development of information technology and its appropriate implementation, it remains true that the electronic delivery of information has the ability to provide easy and open to access to that information for all people. This is a fundamental factor in tackling social exclusion.

Whilst perhaps not meeting Jimba's ideal of the culturally appropriate implementation of technology, there are some developments in providing access to electronic information. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (www.gatesfoundation.org) is undertaking initiatives to provide access to electronic information in remote communities. One such initiative is the Canadian Partnership Program, which has to date provided $18.2 million to libraries in the extremely remote communities in Canada that lie above the 60th parallel. A large proportion of the population in this area are aboriginal or members of First Nation bands or tribes. These grants are used to purchase and install computers and training labs, as well as to provide training for staff and ongoing support. The initiative continues to help residents

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in these low-income communities with literacy and computer skills, increased job opportunities and access to education and healthcare material. In the course of implementing the program, the foundation concluded that any long-range benefits must derive from wholehearted investment from the communities themselves in order to guarantee the success and sustainability of the project. (Erickson, 2002)

Another similar Gates Foundation initiative is taking place in Chile, where over $9 million has been given to provide training, computers and internet access for all Chilean public libraries. The "Network of Public Libraries for the New Millennium project" also receives support from local partners, including the Chilean government, the Chilean Association of Municipalities and other non-profit organisations. This program is the first effort by the foundation to provide public access to technology and digital information to low-income communities outside the North America and the UK. The project commenced in February 2002. (www.gatesfoundation.org)

What role do library journals have in addressing issues of social exclusion? There are two strands to the role that library journals can play: firstly, through the information that they convey, that is, their content; secondly, through the way in which the journals themselves are delivered or made available to those who require them.

The content of library journals should be seen to reflect current issues and trends in the information world. In fact, there are a number of journals dedicated to providing up-to-date literature on changing information trends and technological advances. However, to refer to the concept of social exclusion as a trend or a current issue would be to trivialise its importance and ongoing significance. Social equality, both nationally and internationally, should not be perceived as a passing phase or a temporary problem:

> Social exclusion is not a condition but a process. It happens when social institutions (schools, families, libraries) adopt practices and behaviours which discourage integration and fulfilment. (Raven, 2001)

Social inclusion is a concept that should be fundamental to library and information culture and ethics. As such, library journals should not risk being accused of the "take it or leave it" attitude that *Open to All? The Public Library and Social Exclusion* (Muddiman et al., 2001) identified as having existed in some libraries. Library journals are in the position of being the principal informers of the information profession. In order for social inclusion to be at the heart of the information profession's working culture, it must also become an integral part of the journals that inform that culture.

There are two ways in which library journals can work towards this. Firstly, they can encourage and support research of articles that address issues of social inclusion, social exclusion and the digital divide. For example, the *Library Association Record* has a regular column on social inclusion. Journals can adopt similar practices if appropriate, otherwise they can encourage authors to publish research that either directly examines issues of social equality, or to present research into other areas that takes into account issues of social inclusivity. In addition, as we have seen, combating social exclusion requires the allocation of resources (Vincent, 2001). Clearly, library journals have a part to play in meeting resource requirements by publishing examples of good practice.

Secondly, library journals can incorporate the promotion of social inclusion into any relevant statements of purpose, topicality or coverage. *Libraries for All: Social Inclusion in Public Libraries* (Department for Culture, 1999) calls for libraries to mainstream social inclusion as a policy priority. Similarly, rather than coming under general umbrella terms, such as "social trends", social inclusion should be integrated into library journals' strategic ambitions, and members of international editorial boards should support and encourage input towards realising this strategy. With emphasis on focused, unbiased and current content, which oversteps parochial boundaries, and by incorporating case studies and experiences of problem solving and meeting new challenges, library journals can help to convey and contribute to the wider social context.

Aside from content, library journals have a further part to play in combating social exclusion through their own formatting. According to the website NewJour (http://gort.ucsd.edu/newjour/ - accessed on 17th April 2002), there are currently 11,645 electronic journals available, and this number will continue to increase as more print journals make themselves available electronically. There are many advantages directly relating to issues of social inclusion to be gained from journals appearing in electronic format. Literature of this kind has the potential to be disseminated more quickly and easily, to a wider audience and more cost-effectively. Journals that are available over the internet can be obtained by any library or library user – at a cost. This is undoubtedly a move towards social inclusion, as, for some libraries, print journals may be unobtainable *and* prohibitively expensive. Electronic journals have made information physically available – the question now is how to overcome barriers of cost for information resources that need information but cannot afford it?

There is no easy or ideal answer to this question, most publishers' primary purpose being business and not altruism. Nevertheless, there are plenty of examples of free access to information for all people over a range of interests. For example, in the world of medicine, the British Medical Journal, arguably the most respected medical journal in the UK, is available free online (www.bmj.com), as are a whole host of other medical journals (see www.lib.uiowa.edu/hardin/md/ej.html). Biologists can access The Plant Cell (www.plantcell.org/) and Plant Physiology (www.plantphysiol.org/) free online from the American Society of Plant Biologists. In the area of information and library research, Information Research (http://informationr.net/ir/) is an international, peer reviewed electronic journal 'dedicated to making freely accessible the results of research across a wide range of information-related disciplines'. These examples are just an indication of the large amount of quality information available free-of-charge over the internet. Whilst access to journals may be charged, some publishers often provide free trials to their electronic journals. Furthermore, other, related, information can be accessed free of charge, such as Emerald's *Library Link* – current awareness for the information professional (www.emeraldinsight.com/librarylink/index.htm) and *Literati Club* – support and services for authors and editors (www.emeraldinsight.com/literaticlub/index.htm). The information from these sources can be disseminated further. Library journals could follow these examples, perhaps by making available the full text of articles that address issues of social inclusion and exclusion free online.

IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) has established a joint steering group with the International Publishers' Association, designed to create a joint forum, which could discuss areas of mutual interest, such as freedom to publish, freedom of access to information, legal and voluntary deposit and archiving of information and so forth. One of the issues discussed by the group is differential pricing for libraries in developing countries unable to afford rapidly increasing prices for print journals or licences for electronic journals. The group hope that this, and other initiatives, such as the World Health Organisation's announcement to provide reduced charge or free subscriptions to selected journals, is the beginning of a trend. (Shimmon, 2001)

Electronic delivery means that literature can reach remote users who may otherwise be unable to visit a library. Evidently there is a section of people who remain information poor despite this – those that do not have access to a PC and telephone line or satellite connection – and this group must be addressed. Nevertheless, this must not detract from the fact that electronic delivery of material has gone some way to providing information to a section of society that was previously unable to obtain it.

A final interesting point is made by Byrne (2000) in his article "Towards a World of Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression":

> The last half-century has seen the recognition of fundamental human rights across the world. Almost all nations, even most of the most repressed, have acceded to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and legitimize themselves by claiming foundations in democracy, the rule of the nation's people or, at least, rule in the interests of the people ... Fundamental to real democracy, the real capacity of the peoples of each nation to choose their leaders and style of government and society, is the unfettered ability to express personal

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> views, to access information freely and to hear or read the opinions of others. Without that capacity, no person can truly be free. Freedom of expression, in the sense of both imparting and receiving information, is crucial to human liberty and democracy. (Byrne, 2000, p.255)

Byrne states that the preservation of information is a preservation of freedom, and that library and information workers stand for the essential principles of freedom of thought, freedom of inquiry and freedom of expression. These principles evidently rely upon ensuring that all members of all societies have access to the information that they need.

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